

Filtering friendship through phronesis

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Filtering Friendship through *Phronesis*: ‘One Thought too Many’?

KRISTJÁN KRISTJÁNSSON

Abstract

An adequate moral theory must – or so many philosophers have argued – be compatible with the attitudes and practical requirements of deep friendship. Bernard Williams suggested that the decision procedure required by both deontology and consequentialism inserts a fetishising filter between the natural moral motivation of any normal person to prioritise friends and the decision to act on it. But this interjects ‘one thought too many’ into the moral reaction mechanism. It is standardly assumed that virtue ethics is somehow immune to this objection. The present article explores this assumption and finds it wanting in various respects. Virtue ethics filters friendship through *phronesis* and thus inserts an extra thought into the mechanism in question. To escape Williams’s curse, the only way is to argue that the extra thought required by virtue ethics is not ‘one thought too many’. The article closes with an attempt to show that, contra deontology, the friendship motivation in virtue ethics is derived from the moral virtue, not the intellectual filter, and, contra consequentialism, *phronesis* does not require the maximisation of value. The presumed advantage of virtue ethics must lie in the content of its filter rather than the filter’s non-existence.

1. Introduction

For most people, philosophers as well as non-philosophers, friendship constitutes a significant – if not necessarily an unalloyed – good, constitutive of human wellbeing. In Aristotle’s view, on which most subsequent friendship discussions have drawn, ‘no one would choose to live without friends even if he had all the other goods’.¹ This does not mean that friendship is the ‘highest good’ or, insofar as it is to be understood as a virtue, the ‘master virtue’, trumping all others, for other goods, such as health, could well have the same status. Possessing all other conceivable goods in life is somewhat useless if one does not have the health to enjoy them. Nevertheless, various philosophers have taken up the cudgel for Aristotle and turned friendship into a theoretical construct of sufficient moral salience to serve as a benchmark for the evaluation of general moral theories. An adequate moral theory must, for example, on Badhwar Kapur’s understanding, be compatible with the attitudes and practical requirements of friendship, correctly conceptualised.²

In a seminal paper by Bernard Williams,³ which blazed a trail of numerous follow-ups in the next two decades, he argued that both the reigning moral theories of the day, utilitarian consequentialism and Kantian deontology, failed this adequacy test for a similar reason: namely, by compelling us to subject our obvious natural choice to prioritise the needs of a close friend (or a loved one) over those of a stranger, in times of moral danger, to a theoretical decision procedure before coming up with the ‘right’ reaction. Such requirements of reflective calculation rob us, according to Williams, of psycho-moral reasons to live at all by attacking the source of any integrity-grounding prime motivation that makes us tick. The decision procedure required by

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. T. Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1985), 207 [1155a5–6].

² N. Badhwar Kapur, ‘Why It Is Wrong to Be Always Guided by the Best: Consequentialism and Friendship’, *Ethics* 101 (1991): 483–504, p. 485.

³ B. Williams, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

these two moral theories – be it the categorical imperative or the utility calculus – inserts a filter (which Williams seems to think of as an artificial gadget or fetish) between the natural moral motivation of any normal person and the decision to act on it. But this interjects what Williams famously terms ‘one thought too many’ into the moral reaction mechanism and fetishises it in the service of a psychologically overbearing theory.

The problem identified by Williams has become known as ‘the problem of integrity’, but as Williams uses ‘integrity’ in a somewhat idiosyncratic sense with respect to either lay or philosophical uses,⁴ I prefer to refer to it as ‘the problem of alienation’. Williams basically urges that being held in thrall by the rationalist demands of the categorical imperative or the amoral assumption of the utility calculus (which considers pleasure as the highest good) alienates us from our most significant others and in the end from ourselves. Juxtaposing this argument with Aristotle’s well-known one about the predicament of the vicious who, because they are not capable of loving themselves, also become incapable of loving others,⁵ Williams turns the psychology upside down: because the moral fetishisers are barred from forming integrity-grounding unconditional commitments to their beloved ones (including their closest friends), they also become alienated from their core commitments to themselves as moral agents that give them any reasons for living or acting at all. The ‘one-thought-too-many’ argument has become something of a mantra and I revisit it in more detail in Section 2, albeit only insofar as it is relevant for the purposes of the present article.

So what are the ‘present purposes’ then? My aim is, briefly put, to explore a specific assumption that has emerged from the above-mentioned literature. While not explicitly elicited

⁴ Cf. K. Kristjánsson, ‘Is the Virtue of Integrity Redundant in Aristotelian Virtue Ethics?’ *Apeiron* 53 (2019): 93–115.

⁵ Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution, The Eudemian Ethics, On Virtues and Vices*, trans. H. Rackham (London: William Heinemann, 1935), 405 [1240b15–19]; op. cit. note 1, 246–247 [1166b1–25].

by Williams himself, the lesson that most scholars seem have drawn from the problem of alienation is that virtue ethics is somehow invulnerable to it and hence better equipped to deal with the desirably realistic features of common-sense morality that make us commit to it in the first place. Needless to say, there are various other features that may draw people towards virtue ethics as an alternative to the other two moral theories – one commonly noted being its facility to make sense of the role of emotions in the morally good life.⁶ However, it is typically suggested or even stated without argument that the fact that only virtue ethics makes do without a filter between deep friendship – as a ‘virtue’ or relation between people that ‘involves virtue’⁷ – and moral decisions provides a reason to abandon utilitarianism and deontology and adopt virtue ethics as one’s moral theory.⁸ My aim is to problematise the assumption about this unique advantage of virtue ethics. There are many things to like about virtue ethics, but this is, I submit, not one of them.

Notice some odd features about this assumption. First, it is not clearly elicited by Williams himself, as already noted. Second, despite the flurry of responses that followed Williams’s piece, none developed in detail – to the best of my knowledge – the positive side of the argument. In other words, the claim that virtue ethics has unique resources to counter the one-thought-too-many argument simply continued to be implicitly assumed rather than argued for. Third, the assumption in question would work if Aristotelian virtue ethics were an intuitionist moral theory. However, any intuitionist readings of Aristotle tend to be misreadings (see Section 3). Alternatively, it would work if friendship were an overriding master virtue in Aristotle’s system, but it is not, with Aristotle himself saying in the *Eudemian Ethics* that those

⁶ K. Kristjánsson, *Virtuous Emotions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁷ Op. cit. note 1, 207 [1155a1–2].

⁸ See e.g. R. F. Card, ‘Consequentialism, Teleology, and the New Friendship Critique’, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 85 (2004): 149–172, p. 149, although Card refrains from categorising virtue ethics as a ‘theory’.

who unreflectively ‘give everything to one whom they love [*qua philia*] are good-for-nothing people’.⁹ In fact, there is no master moral virtue in Aristotle on a par with, say, justice in Plato.

There is, however, unquestionably, a meta-virtue in Aristotle’s virtue ethical system: namely, the intellectual virtue of *phronesis*. In addition to helping individual moral virtues find means to their ends, *phronesis* helps solve apparent virtue conflicts, and it also informs the content of the virtues as they are understood by the agent, by bringing them into harmony with an intellectually grounded blueprint of the good life – for Aristotle’s is not a Humean theory of moral motivation. I say more about this in Section 4. At the present juncture, it suffices to note that *phronesis* seems to provide a filter through which any virtuous considerations needs to pass – including those of friendship – before they can justifiably issue in either reason-imbued emotion (such as compassion towards a friend) or action (such as helping a friend). It is therefore hard to shake the impression that *phronesis* imports an ‘extra thought’ between the motivational force of virtuous friendship as a disposition and particular (re)actions of friendship. Does such filtering of friendship through *phronesis* fall prey to Williams’s one-thought-too-many argument against moral theories and undermine the assumption about the unique advantage of virtue ethics – or do not all extra thoughts count as ‘one thought too many’? These questions call for some sustained analysis in subsequent sections. To anticipate, my conclusion will be that while Williams’s own understanding of the one-thought-too-many argument is too radical, it is worthwhile inquiring what sort of an extra thought counts as detrimental to moral theorising and what sort does not. I argue that although *phronesis* elicits an extra thought, it falls into the latter category.

The kind of friendship I am interested in here, and to which Williams was clearly referring, is what we would normally refer to as ‘deep’ or ‘best’ friendship. For the sake of

⁹ Op. cit. note 5, 433 [1244a17–19].

simplification, I assume that ‘deep’ or ‘best friendships’, on a contemporary understanding, are close enough to ‘character friendships’ in Aristotle’s well-known qualitative tripartite system (of friendships for pleasure, utility and character) to speak of them in the same breath. I happen to agree also with Aristotle’s controversial contention that the highest and only ‘complete’ form of friendship, namely friendship for character, is grounded in moral qualities rather than, say, aesthetic ones.¹⁰ A fair number of caveats would ideally need to be entered here about Aristotle’s friendship theory, but I will limit myself to observing that Aristotle’s account of character friendships is unduly idealised and insensitive to numerous potential difficulties.¹¹ Be that as it may, the aim of this article is not to defend an orthodox Aristotelian specification of friendship. The aim is rather to argue that the assumption of (deep) friendship, on an everyday contemporary understanding, being somehow an unconditional, unreflective virtue in Aristotelian virtue ethics is misguided, and that friendship requires ‘filtering’ in Aristotelian virtue ethics just as in the other two major moral theories, albeit not filtering that necessarily imports ‘one thought too many’.

2. Some reflections on the problem of alienation

As most of the responses that fuelled the lengthy debate about Williams’s bombshell argument have come from consequentialists, and consequentialism is logically closer to virtue ethics than deontology (in being teleological), I will focus on those responses here. The aim is not to rehearse this debate in any detail, but simply to foreground the features that may be relevant for the discussion in the remainder of this article.

¹⁰ Contra e.g. A. Nehamas, *On Friendship* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

¹¹ K. Kristjánsson, ‘Ten un-Aristotelian Reasons for the Instability of Aristotelian Character Friendships’, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 49 (2019): 40–58.

The first thing to note is that the problem of alienation is logically distinct from the other standard objection lodged against consequentialist theories, especially of the traditional utilitarian kind: the problem of repugnant consequences (aka ‘the problem of victimisation’). Whereas the alleged repugnant consequences (e.g. in well-rehearsed transplant and trolley cases) point to *moral* errors in consequentialism, and the typical responses (about the need to focus on long-term consequences, including those of precedents set, or on the threat to overall utility incurred by sacrificing people in lower moral risk zones for people in higher zones) seek to show that consequentialism is not prone to those moral errors, the problem of alienation is not first and foremost a moral problem. What sort of a problem is it then? Williams’s own words often indicate that it is a problem of *rationality*: namely, that it is ‘*unreasonable* for a man to give up [...] something which is a condition of his having any interest in being around in the world at all’.¹² However, a closer look at Williams’s argument reveals an even more menacing and deep-rooted source, for Williams also introduces the idea of a ‘categorical desire’, the satisfaction or non-satisfaction of which settles the question of whether the agent cares to stay alive or not.¹³ For all normal people, Williams assumes, the desire to prioritise the needs of close friends constitutes such a categorical desire. Hence, it is *psychologically* impossible at the same time to suppress this desire (in the interest of a moral theory) and to continue to live. To succumb, say, to the utility-maximising demands of consequentialist moral theories is, therefore, not so much immoral and irrational as simply stretching human psychology beyond the breaking point. It is, in Williams’s sense, not alienating only *vis-à-vis* the significant other(s), but self-alienating and self-destroying.

¹² Op. cit. note 3, 14, my italics; cf. M. Bernstein, ‘Friends without Favouritism’, *Journal of Value Inquiry* 41 (2007): 59–76, pp. 67–68.

¹³ Op. cit. note 3, 11.

The standard interpretation of Williams's argument is, as Wolf correctly points out,¹⁴ that the psychological impossibility kicks in at the moment of the moral decision. So it is the person who thinks *at the time of action* about what would be morally permissible (e.g. in a case involving a choice to save a close friend/spouse versus a stranger) who falls prey to the problem of alienation, not the person who prepares herself, for instance, as a moral learner for facing moral dilemmas later in life by thinking through various possibilities beforehand in order, say, to strengthen her commitment to her categorical desires or to figure out what those really are. Incidentally, I agree with Wolf that this interpretation of Williams's argument is not radical enough, but before elaborating on that point, a few reminders are in order about how consequentialists have tried to parry it, on the standard interpretation.

Responding to Williams has turned into a whole cottage industry. Many of these responses take the form of rejecting the claim that thinking through moral possibilities at the time of action, in cases such as the above, is bound to alienate the thinker from others and then herself. The general complaint is that this argument romanticises and de-intellectualises deep friendships overly and overlooks the continually morally reflective and probing nature of at least some such friendships.¹⁵ This general complaint can then be developed along various argumentative avenues, for instance by illustrating how, at least in the case of two devoted consequentialists, the decision to honour the mutual friendship may be seen as even more precious and noble by the friend if it involves, and is reached on the back of, a lengthy reflection on the general happiness of humankind.¹⁶ It is even possible to envisage a conscious pact made

¹⁴ S. Wolf, "One Thought too Many": Love, Morality, and the Ordering of Commitment, in U. Heuer and G. Lang (eds.), *Luck, Value, and Commitment: Themes from the Ethics of Bernard Williams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 71–92, p. 74.

¹⁵ See e.g. P. Railton's classic piece, 'Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13 (1984): 134–171.

¹⁶ See e.g. E. Conee, 'Friendship and Consequentialism', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 79 (2001): 161–179; Bernstein op. cit. note 12.

between two consequentialist friends that they will never favour each other over others except as a result of rigorous deliberation about the total state of the world, and that they admire each other the more they hold to this pact, even when the friend's decision goes against them in the end. The trouble is that, while one can imagine certain people deriving fulfilment from such considerations and such a pact (say, someone like Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill), this would hardly generalise to the rest of humankind. Indeed, one would be seriously tempted to invoke here as examples people at, or close to, the autistic spectrum. Williams's argument does not require that *all* people have a categorical desire of the sort he describes; it suffices that the majority of normal moral agents do. Otherwise, the demands of consequentialism are prone to fall foul of Flanagan's criterion of 'minimal psychological realism':¹⁷ of not being feasibly attainable for (*most*) beings like us.

A more promising line of response is to accept Williams's claim that thinking through moral possibilities at the time of action, in cases such as the one about the friend and the stranger, is likely to be self-alienating, and then to make sure somehow that one's preferred version of consequentialism accommodates this fact. One way of doing that is to adopt rule utilitarianism, rather than act utilitarianism, as one's conscious moral theory, and to argue that many privileged duties to friends are justified by their overall conduciveness to the maximisation of the general good, even if they happen to appear to be utility-reducing in a particular case.¹⁸ However, rule utilitarianism imports problems of its own, both because of its tendency to collapse logically into act utilitarianism¹⁹ and because adopting it consciously as one's preferred moral theory seems to call for reflection at the time of action, which is exactly what Williams's argument debar us

¹⁷ O. Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 32.

¹⁸ See e.g. E. Telfer, 'Friendship', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 71 (1970–1971), 223–241, p. 235.

¹⁹ D. Lyons, *Forms and Limits of Utilitarianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).

from doing. More plausibly, the consequentialist could stick to act utilitarianism but augment it with the *psychological* thesis that considering alternative possibilities to prioritising the needs of a close friend at the time of action is psychologically incompatible with a concern for utility, and such considerations should therefore be forestalled. For if it is in fact true that (even considering the possibility of) not prioritising the friend robs the agent psychologically of the will to live, then there are good consequentialist reasons for *habituating* oneself into prioritising the friend *spontaneously* (as distinct from adopting the prioritisation as a rule to follow). The objection that the world would be better still if considerations of overall utility could be engaged in at the time of action will not cut ice with the consequentialist who has taken this psychological thesis on board because consequentialism is not a theory about other possible worlds, but just this world, and what ‘a consequentialist theory tells us we ought to do is always actually possible’.²⁰

At the risk of getting ahead of my argument in Section 3, let me remark here that this response to the standard interpretation of Williams’s argument may also seem to make Aristotelian *phronesis* immune to it, at least on one reading of *phronesis*. Some scholars emphasise the developmental function of *phronesis* as an intellectual virtue that prepares agents beforehand for taking the right decision by ‘metabolising the past to simulate possible futures’.²¹ This will then explain the facility of *phronesis* to get things ‘intuitively’ right at the time of action. It is not because *phronesis* itself serves as a vehicle of intuition, but rather because it has prepared us so well for what could happen that once we enter into an already-reflected-upon situation, all that *phronesis* needs to do is to activate our sensitivity to this being the sort of situation that calls for a certain reaction, without the need for further deliberation at the time of action – because perception happens before deliberation and preempts it. On this reading, there

²⁰ Conee op. cit. note 16, 178–179.

²¹ P. Railton, ‘Intuitive Guidance: Emotion, Information and Experience’, in M. E. P. Seligman, P. Railton, R. F. Baumeister and C. Sripade (eds.), *Homo Prospectus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): 33–85, pp. 45–46.

does not seem to be any danger of *phronesis* importing ‘one thought too many’. However, this reading does not show virtue ethics to be superior to simple act utilitarianism in this respect, provided we grant that the psychological thesis suggested in the preceding paragraph may also save act utilitarianism from the problem of alienation.

What seems to be too good to be true is usually too good to be true. The whole problem to which Williams alerted us seems to have disappeared, simply because initial credibility has been granted to the standard interpretation of his argument. Yet on that interpretation the argument bewilders rather than enthralls, in particular if it is meant to point towards the superiority of virtue ethics as a moral theory. Snatching potential defeat from the jaws of victory, Wolf explains well, in an intriguing paper, the extent to which the standard interpretation defangs Williams’s argument. Williams’s intention was much more radical than standardly acknowledged: namely, not only to show that reflecting on what to do, *at the moment of action*, in cases involving friend–stranger conflicts, is psychologically impossible, in the sense of being self-alienating, but rather that any reflections on the possibility of betraying the friend will be self-alienating, even if engaged in ‘*off stage*’: be it *prospectively*, to prepare oneself for proper decision making at the time of action, or *retrospectively*, to justify to oneself what one has done. Removing the deliberations from the emotionally charged scene of the action does not rescue the extra thought from being one thought too many.²²

On this radical interpretation, there is no way in which the strategy invoked above can rescue consequentialism because it is impossible to ask the consequentialist to hold all considerations regarding the utility of prioritising friends over strangers (or vice versa) in abeyance, not only during but also before and after the relevant event. That simply goes against the grain of the very idea of consequentialist calculations of the overall good. There must be a

²² Op. cit. note 14.

time in which those can be engaged in, no holds barred. The radical interpretation also brings home to us, much more so than the standard interpretation, the sense of ‘moral schizophrenia’ that Stocker²³ famously attributed to the endorsement of the two competing moral theories of the day: the sense that those theories propose determinable methods for considering when goods like deep friendship ought to be outweighed by more general requirements of duty or the overall good.²⁴ However, this creates a schizophrenia in the psychology of the normal moral agent to the extent that what she is meant to value and calculate as valuable jars with what in fact moves her most. Notably, the radical interpretation also casts serious doubts on the facility of Aristotelian virtue ethics to escape from the clutches of Williams’s argument, for *phronesis* is surely presented by Aristotle as a method of moral deliberation, and a determinable one at that, although admittedly not codifiable in exactly the same sense as the utility calculus or the categorical imperative (see further in Section 3).

The radical interpretation of Williams’s argument presents us with the following dilemma, given the aim of the present article. Either we accept the argument with respect to *phronesis*, but then we implicitly concede that every extra thought of the kind envisaged above will count as one thought too many, and that seems to do away with *phronesis* altogether (unless we understand *phronesis* as some sort of intuitive artistry, outstripping conscious thought, but that is a misguided understanding of *phronesis*, as I argue in Section 3). Or we reject the argument with respect to *phronesis*, but then we need to show either that *phronesis* does not import an extra thought into the decision-making process (which I think is impossible), or that although *phronesis* imports an extra thought *qua* filter, it is not one thought too many for some substantive reasons and hence the ‘filter’ is not ‘fetishising’ in the same way as, say, the utility calculus.

²³ M. Stocker, ‘The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories’, *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976): 453–466.

²⁴ Cf. S. Woodcock, ‘Moral Schizophrenia and the Paradox of Friendship’, *Utilitas* 22 (2010): 1–25, p. 14.

While I propose to go down the second avenue in Section 4, we can safely conclude at this juncture that there are no obvious escape routes in Williams's argument (on the radical interpretation) that would prevent Aristotelian virtue ethics from potentially being sent to the gallows along with the other two dominant moral theories. However, before that sentence *phronesis* needs a fair and thorough hearing.

3. *Phronesis* as an intellectual filter

The important role that the intellectual virtue of *phronesis* plays in all Aristotelian or quasi-Aristotelian forms of virtue ethics was noted in Section 1. In order to answer the question of whether *phronesis* imports one thought too many, various considerations need to be addressed (see the current and next sections), beginning in this section with some reflections on what *phronesis* really is. To cut a long story short, the easiest way to show that *phronesis* does not import one thought too many about deep friendship would be to argue, with regard to the (a) nature and (b) content of *phronesis*, that (a) *phronesis* does not add an extra thought, but simply serves as an intuition pump, and moreover (b) that this pump motivates the unconditional prioritisation of deep friendship as a moral concern. I have already provided a citation from Aristotle that seems to rule out (b). However, remember that virtue ethics is a naturalistic moral theory, answerable to empirical findings on how people actually flourish or wilt, and it could well be the case that (b) needs to be revised in the light of new empirical evidence to accommodate a primacy-of-friendship intuition. After such revision, *phronesis* could still potentially be considered to retain the spirit, as distinct from the letter, of Aristotelian virtue ethics.

Alternatively, there are other variants of virtue ethics than the Aristotelian one and some of those could accommodate friendship as a master virtue.²⁵

It is more difficult to revise (a) by eliciting other variants because the guidance that all leading virtue ethicists in the West tend to follow on *phronesis* has been wrenched from Aristotle, and there is, to the best of my knowledge, no completely un-Aristotelian *phronesis* theory out there (although many theorists rely on MacIntyre's rendering which departs from Aristotle's in some respects²⁶). Not all hope is lost, however, of escaping Williams's curse, for there are almost as many variants of 'Aristotelian' *phronesis* as there are Aristotelian exegetes, and some of those understand the workings of *phronesis* first and foremost in terms of intuitive artistry rather than as an extra thought, let alone a thought too many. I will consider two of those variants later in this section, but first some brief rehearsals of Aristotle's own account are in order.

Aristotle's *phronesis* is an intellectual virtue (virtue of thought) that serves the purpose of living well by monitoring and guiding the moral virtues. Building on emotional dispositions cultivated through early-years habituation, *phronesis* re-evaluates those dispositions critically, allowing them to truly 'share in reason', and provides the agent with proper justifications for them. In addition to latching itself on to every 'natural' moral virtue, and infusing it with systematic reason, the function of *phronesis* is to 'deliberate finely' about the relative weight of competing values, actions and emotions in the context of the question of 'what promotes living well in general'. A person who has acquired *phronesis* has thus, *inter alia*, the wisdom to adjudicate the relative weight of different virtues in apparent conflict situations and to reach a measured verdict about best courses of action.²⁷ This is, more or less, where the consensus ends

²⁵ Cf. D. Cocking and J. Kennett, 'Friendship and Moral Danger', *Journal of Philosophy* 97 (2000): 278–296; Cicero, *How to Be a Friend*, trans. P. Freeman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 35 and 45.

²⁶ See K. Kristjánsson, *Aristotle, Emotions and Education* (Aldershot: Ashgate/Routledge, 2007), chap. 11.

²⁷ Op. cit. note 1, 153, 154, 159, 164, 171 [1140a26–29, 1140b4–6, 1141b30–31, 1143a8–9, 1144b30–32].

on what *phronesis* really involves and the controversial interpretations begin, which haunt the landscape of Aristotelian scholarship. While I want to avoid begging controversial questions about what *phronesis* is, simply for the sake of moving on with the discussion of Williams's argument, I do not think that 'anything goes' in Aristotelian exegesis and I reserve the right below to reject interpretations that are blatantly un-Aristotelian.

Let me highlight here the oddity that although *phronesis* is undergoing a revival, not only within contemporary virtue ethics, but also in social scientific circles and in various areas of applied professional ethics, no psychological instrument currently exists to measure *phronesis* (although the measure designed by Brienza and colleagues perhaps comes close to it²⁸). This is even more remarkable given the current burgeoning of so-called wisdom research in psychology.²⁹ Serious efforts are now afoot, however, to remedy this shortcoming by an interdisciplinary team of philosophers and psychologists.³⁰ The advantage of instrument design is that relevant conceptual nuances need to be elicited and the components of the construct under examination identified in detail. According to the fairly minimalist reading by Darnell and colleagues of Aristotelian *phronesis*, it serves at least four distinct functions and thus constitutes what psychologists would call a four-component construct. Here is a quick overview of those functions.³¹

(i) *Constitutive function*. This is the ability, and eventually cognitive excellence, which enables an agent to perceive what the salient features of a given situation are from an ethical perspective, and to see what is required in a given situation as reason(s) for responding in certain

²⁸ J. P. Brienza, F. Y. H. Kung, H. C. Santos, D. R. Bobocel and I. Grossmann, 'Wisdom, Bias, and Balance: Toward a Process-Sensitive Measurement of Wisdom-Related Cognition', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 115 (2018): 1093–1126.

²⁹ See I. Grossman, 'Wisdom in Context', *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 12 (2017): 233–257.

³⁰ C. Darnell, L. Gulliford, K. Kristjánsson and P. Panos, 'Phronesis and the Knowledge–Action Gap in Moral Psychology and Moral Education: A New Synthesis?' *Human Development* 62 (2019): 101–129.

³¹ See further in *ibid*.

ways. (ii) *Integrative function*. This component involves integrating different components of a good life, especially in dilemmatic situations where different ethically salient considerations or virtues appear to be in conflict. This function is highly situation-specific, which means that traditional wisdom research in psychology, which homes in on more global capacities, is mostly irrelevant to the derivation of a *phronesis* construct. (iii) *Blueprint function*. *Phronetic* persons possess a general conception of the good life (*eudaimonia*) and adjust their moral identity to that blueprint, thus furnishing it with motivational force. This does not mean that each ordinary person needs to have the same sophisticated comprehension of the ‘grand end’ of human life as a philosopher or an experienced statesperson might have, in order to count as possessing *phronesis*. Rather the sort of grasp of a blueprint of the aims of human life informing (and informed by) *phronesis* is within the grasp of the ordinary well-brought-up individual and reflected in ordinary acts. It draws upon the person’s standpoint of life as a whole and determines the place that different goods occupy in the larger context and how they interact with other goods. This blueprint is ideally ‘on call’ in every situation of action. (iv) *Emotional regulation function*. *Phronesis* requires, and contributes to, the agent’s emotions being in line with her construal of a given situation, moral judgement and decision, thereby also offering motivation for the appropriate response. Notice that emotional regulation must not be understood here in terms of emotional suppression or policing, but rather as the infusion of emotion with reason, which calibrates the emotion in line with the morally and rationally warranted medial state of feeling, and the subsequent harmony between the two.

To be sure, this identification of the four core components of Aristotelian *phronesis* does not dissolve all exegetical disputes about the concept. However, it does help fend off seriously aberrant interpretations, including those which consider *phronesis* a mere intuition pump. Indeed,

I do believe the idea of ‘phronetic intuitionism’ (as espoused e.g. by Kaspar in this journal³²) involves something of an oxymoron. Let me briefly mention two attempts at ‘intuition-ising’ *phronesis*, one from the current education literature and the other from contemporary moral psychology.

There is a powerful approach in recent educational theory (harking back at least to Dunne³³) which offers an (allegedly Aristotelian) anti-realist, non-foundationalist, perspectivist and particularist account of education: most felicitously described as a ‘*phronesis-praxis* approach’. I have criticised this approach in detail elsewhere³⁴ and will not repeat that critique here except insofar as it relates to an intuitionist reading of *phronesis*. According to Dunne, we need to avoid seeing *phronesis* in terms of ‘the *application* of theory to particular cases’.³⁵ In *praxis*, as the sphere of *phronesis*, ‘practical-moral universals cannot unproblematically cover or include particular cases’ precisely because the former contain ‘an element of indeterminateness’.³⁶ This is, in Dunne’s words, so far from being a defect that it is, rather, ‘the great merit’ of *phronesis*:³⁷ best captured by terms such as ‘particularist discernment’, ‘intuitive artistry’, ‘perceptual capacity’, ‘illative sense’ or ‘situational appreciation’. *Phronesis* is, in other words, *the eye* of moral experience: the discernment of particular situations that enables us ‘to see aright’ every time, but which remains ultimately experiential rather than universal ‘since the universals within its grasp are always modifiable in the light of its continuing exposure to particular cases’.³⁸ This intuitionist reading of *phronesis* then allows Dunne and his followers to

³² D. Kaspar, ‘How We Decide in Moral Situations’, *Philosophy* 90 (2015): 59–81.

³³ J. Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground: ‘Phronesis’ and ‘Techné’ in Modern Philosophy and in Aristotle* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

³⁴ Op. cit. note 26, chap. 11.

³⁵ Op. cit. note 33, 157.

³⁶ Ibid., 311.

³⁷ Ibid., 314.

³⁸ Ibid., 280, 293, 297 and 361.

make sweeping generalisations about the essential uncodifiability of Aristotelian *phronesis*-guided ethical and educational decision making.

The snag is that Aristotle's much-cited assertion that *phronesis* is about particulars and therefore needs perception³⁹ says nothing about the epistemological priority of perception. A simpler interpretation is that Aristotle considered universal moral beliefs that would be fully capable of taking into account every possible situation to be so complicated – although logically possible – that they would in fact be impossible to learn and apply. Think, for instance, of all the comparisons that would need to be made between individuals with simultaneous, yet diverse, interests. Instead of trying to achieve such a super-human feat, it would be better to acquire a perceptual awareness that guides us to the right answer in the greatest number of factual situations – as we, more realistically, define only 'as far as we can'.⁴⁰ *Phronesis*, while not unproblematically codifiable, because of its 'practical' as distinct from 'theoretical' subject matter, is thus not necessarily (but merely contingently) uncodifiable. A perfect moral theory, which resolved once and for all every question of application, would be possible only for a perfect being. Yet what remains is the 'blueprint function' of *phronesis*, which applies a general conception of the human *telos* to diverse, complex ethical situations and furnishes the agent with theoretical tools – an intellectual 'filter' if you like – to think through complex practical situations, rather than having to rely simply on hunches.

A less sophisticated attempt to co-opt Aristotle to the intuitionist camp has recently been made by social intuitionists: the proponents of the currently fashionable two-system (dual-process) theories of moral decision making.⁴¹ According to social intuitionism, people typically

³⁹ Op. cit. note 1, 160–161 [1142a12–30].

⁴⁰ Ibid., 243 [1165a35].

⁴¹ See e.g. J. Haidt, 'The Emotional Dog and its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment', *Psychological Review* 108 (2001): 814–834.

experience a moral intuition about a given state of affairs – an emotion-driven hunch or an implicit sense of what is the appropriate reaction. Such intuitions normally do not require explicit, effortful reasoning; indeed they seem to persist in the face of contrary rational judgement or of the lack of any rationally grounded conviction. They often arise non-voluntarily and are not fully articulable. Most importantly, they motivate spontaneous action, uninformed by conscious deliberation, although people exhibit a tendency – through motivations such as peer pressure and canonical norms of discourse – to justify their actions retrospectively. Here would be the proposed Aristotelian corollary, then. Human beings typically act upon motivations provided by general traits of character: vicious, virtuous or somewhere in between. We are essentially creatures of habits (*qua* traits). These traits include emotions (*pathe*) which are the most immediate motivators of action. However, we are not really responsible for our episodic emotions, such as our bouts of anger or pangs of jealousy; those happen to us rather than being chosen by us. Hence, Aristotelian *pathe* are quite similar to what the social intuitionists such as Haidt understand moral intuitions to be. Indeed, those theorists love the idea of ‘automaticity of virtue’ in Aristotle.

The problem with this analogy is that it is over-simplified to the brink of being blatantly wrong. To be sure, Aristotle does not deny that we may be driven by knee-jerk reactions to events: conditional reflexes and non-cognitive feelings. However, those would not be *pathe* on his understanding, and the claim that *pathe* are not within our responsibility elides important complexities. Let it suffice to say that Aristotelian moral intuitions (*qua pathe*) are part of a learning system that is infused with reason – be it good or bad reason. Moral judgement is in essence an exercise of reason. There is no ‘brute’ moral intuition in Aristotle, and even what he calls ‘natural virtue’ is not ‘natural’ as in either ‘genetically pre-programmed’ or ‘conditioned by

the nature of one's society'. 'Natural virtue' in Aristotle is actually a somewhat infelicitous name for a stage of habituated but non-*phronetic* virtue. True, there is both quick and slow moral decision making in Aristotle, but the difference between the two does not correspond to that between the non-rational versus rational or to emotion versus reason. Aristotle was simply not a two-system dualist, full stop.⁴²

Friendship is indeed a good example here. Early-years habituation, ideally followed by years of autonomous, critical honing of one's dispositions through the exercise of *phronesis*, enables us to react quickly in uncomplicated situations where a close friend needs help. *Phronesis* guides us towards the helping behaviour, almost automatically. However, as soon as the situation becomes more complicated, the decision process slows down, as *phronesis* needs time to kick in and evaluate the situation. Do the needs of the friend conflict with those of another friend, or perhaps a large group of strangers? Has the friend's character changed so dramatically for better or for worse (although Aristotle himself only considered the latter in any detail) that the virtue of friendship does not apply anymore? Furthermore, once we are acting through the mediation of *phronetic* rather than just natural virtue, the filter becomes much more demanding, as it requires not only that we comply with the demands of the most immediate virtue relevant to the given situation (in our case, friendship) but that it also takes account of claims proper to other ethical virtues – say, compassion and justice.⁴³ Friendship as a natural virtue may be compatible with your helping the friend for an unjust or foolish cause. However, from the perspective of *phronesis*-guided virtue, the critical dimensions of the virtue of friendship are not determined by the architectonic of that particular virtue only but also by the

⁴² See further in K. Kristjánsson, *Flourishing as the Aim of Education: A Neo-Aristotelian View* (London: Routledge, 2020), chap. 8.

⁴³ Cf. A. W. Müller, 'Aristotle's Conception of Ethical and Natural Virtue', in J. Szaif and M. Lutz-Bachmann (eds.), *Was ist das für den Menschen Gute?/What is Good for a Human Being?* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004): 18–53.

demands of other virtues. All these different requirements need to be synthesised through *phronesis*, and although that synthesis may appear to proceed fairly quickly and reliably in the case of an experienced moral agent, to get things right the agent still needs to apply the filter of *phronesis* correctly to the concrete situation. There is no room in Aristotelian theory for a *phronetic* decision that is, in principle, unfiltered.

Someone like Stocker⁴⁴ could still argue that because of the essential motivational unity of the *phronetic* agent in Aristotle's virtue ethics, this procedure does not involve the same sort of schizophrenia as in the other moral theories and, hence, some (or perhaps all) of the thrust of Williams's argument can be averted. This consideration is, however, bound to touch even the greatest of Aristotelian aficionados on the raw, for if there is any psychological claim in Aristotle that seems to jar with common intuitions and empirical evidence, it is the one about the motivational unity of the *phronimoi* being such that they never experience regret.⁴⁵ Even those contemporary virtue ethicists who go furthest in sticking to the Aristotelian script, such as Hursthouse, admit that there are tragic situations from which even the most virtuous agents cannot escape with their lives unmarred.⁴⁶ Our ethical outlook as a whole, as well as individual moral virtues such as friendship, need indeed, as Hursthouse points out, to be validated over and over again, 'plank by plank',⁴⁷ by appealing to the blueprint of the good life as it comes into confrontation with complex life situations. This is bound to be a painful process, although perhaps not 'pathological' in the strict sense that Stocker's term 'schizophrenia' may indicate.⁴⁸ The pain cannot be averted by avoiding to apply the filter of *phronesis* and simply relying on

⁴⁴ Op. cit. note 23.

⁴⁵ Op. cit. note 1, 246 [1166a27].

⁴⁶ R. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 74; cf. also. D. Carr, 'Virtue, Mixed Emotions and Moral Ambivalence', *Philosophy* 84 (2009): 31–46.

⁴⁷ Hursthouse, *ibid.*, 165.

⁴⁸ Cf. op. cit. note 24.

some raw ‘intuitions’. By blocking out the ‘extra thought’ needed to remain and to continue to develop as a virtuous agent – and a trusted friend – one proceeds to trivialise the message handed down to us by Aristotelian virtue ethics.

4. Is the ‘extra thought’ in virtue ethics also ‘one thought too many’?

The preceding section demonstrated the futility of the assumption that, because of the alleged facility of virtue ethics to motivate correct friendship-instantiating moral action directly without the mediation of a theoretical filter, there is something unique about virtue ethics as a moral theory that provides immunity from Williams’s one-thought-too-many argument. It turned out that there is no such direct motivation in (Aristotle-inspired) virtue ethics. However, scenting potential defeat at this juncture, it is still possible for the virtue ethicist to argue that although there is an ‘extra thought’ encapsulated by the *phronesis* filter, it does not involve – as opposed to the deontological or consequentialist filters – one thought too many. What could there be unique about the *phronesis* filter that would leave it untouched by the argument that hits at the other two filters? I explore four possible responses below. The first response builds on the thought that *phronesis* does not offer a filter in the same sense as the utility calculus or the categorical imperative because *phronesis* is just about methods of implementation, not content. The other three responses suggest that although the *phronesis* filter is essentially of the same kind as two competing ones, informing the content of moral decision making (e.g. in the case of deep friendship, on which Williams fastens), there is something about its content that escapes or at least mitigates the charge of one thought too many.

(1) ‘The *phronesis* filter is only about means-end reasoning; it does not impose substantive one-thought-too-many constraints on the moral content of the decision, as do the

other two filters; and no moral theory can conceivably work, in any case, without practical advice on how to find the best means to actualising what has been decided.’

This response turns Aristotle-inspired virtue ethicists into pure Humeans about moral motivation. For pure Humeans, reason is irrelevant to the choice of ultimate ends, which is based on non-deliberative desires only. This thesis seems to follow naturally if we take at face value Aristotle’s repeated claims about *phronesis* only constituting reasoning about means to ends, not about the ends themselves that seem rather to be formed non-deliberately through the cultivation of (habituated) virtue.⁴⁹ There are other places in Aristotle’s texts that do challenge this understanding, however, and there is good reason to take those seriously, because they read as more accurate elaborations, or even corrections, of the general thesis about *phronesis* being concerned with means only. There we are told not only that non-intellectual habituation is insufficient for full virtue, but that full virtue requires a decision to choose virtue for itself, and that decision requires *phronesis*. So, although *phronetic* virtue grasps the right ends because the virtuous person has the right desires, those desires require *phronesis* for their creation precisely in order to count as the right desires in the first place.⁵⁰ In other words, the transition from habituated to *phronetic* virtue is one of essence: the previously non-intellectually founded desires become deliberative desires, and they are no longer the *same* desires as before, simply dressed up in fancy intellectual clothes, but rather *new* desires, created by *phronesis*. Hence, I agree with Irwin that Aristotle cannot be categorised as a Humean with respect to Hume’s thesis that all practical thought depends on non-deliberative desires.⁵¹ Insofar as Response (1) is meant to defend virtue ethics, including the intellectual virtue of *phronesis*, and insofar as *phronesis* is an essentially Aristotelian concept, Response (1) fails to show that *phronesis*, in virtue of its

⁴⁹ Op. cit. note 1, 168, 171–172 [1144a6–9, 1145a4–6].

⁵⁰ Ibid., 39–40, 168–169 [1105a28–32, 1144a13–22].

⁵¹ T. H. Irwin, ‘Aristotle on Reason, Desire, and Virtue’, *Journal of Philosophy* 72 (1975): 567–578, p. 571.

proposed exclusive instrumentality, does not incorporate one thought too many – simply because it is not exclusively instrumental.

(2) ‘What makes consequentialists import one thought too many into their thinking about deep friendship is their assumption that the only intrinsically valuable good in the world is pleasure, and that non-intrinsically valuable goods such as friendship need to be measured against it. Similarly, for deontologists, the ultimate moral motivation is derived from respect for the categorical imperative rather than from an intrinsically valuable virtue such as friendship. In contrast, for virtue ethicists, virtues such as friendship are intrinsically valuable.’

In Kantian deontology, the moral motivation to pursue friendship (or any other virtue) does not have its source in the emotional component of the relevant virtue, as in Aristotle-inspired virtue ethics, but in principles of practical reason, encapsulated by the categorical imperative. If the substantive problem identified by Williams’s argument is that the crucial moral motivation is derived from the filter rather than the original source of moral concern (here the friendship), then it is indeed true that virtue ethics escapes his charge. However, I do not think the same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to virtue ethics versus sophisticated forms of consequentialism. Badhwar Kapur complains that ‘consequentialist teleology defines intrinsic value in morally neutral terms and morality as a means to intrinsic value’.⁵² While that is, strictly speaking, true, the implications are not as radical as Badhwar Kapur makes them out to be. For Mill,⁵³ for example, virtues such as justice (and arguably friendship) constitute essential goods that are parts of the sole source of intrinsic value, happiness as pleasure and the absence of pain, rather than just being instrumentally conducive to it. Those are goods that ought to be valued, whether or not we happen to value them or not, and also goods whose moral value remains intact

⁵² Op. cit. note 2, 503.

⁵³ J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

even in the rare cases when they are outweighed by other, more salient, essential goods.⁵⁴ Thus, for the happiness pluralist Mill, the motivation to help a friend would derive from the essential goodness of friendship, rather than from the utility calculus itself. That calculus is only necessary because there are cases where the motivations of different essential goods clash.

There is, in fact, not much to choose between (Millian) consequentialism and virtue ethics here. To love a friend ‘as an end’, Badhwar Kapur says, ‘is to place a special value on her – to believe that her value is not outweighed, say, simply by the greater needs of others or the needs of a greater number of others’.⁵⁵ But this only holds if friendship is the sole intrinsic value in her axiology⁵⁶ or if she considers friendship as a master virtue, like Cicero who insisted that ‘you should place friendship above all other human concerns’.⁵⁷ But those are clear departures from Aristotle and from most contemporary forms of virtue ethics, according to which the intrinsic value of friendship can in principle be overridden by another competing source of intrinsic value. *Phronesis* can be defined as excellence in moral deliberation precisely because of its capacity to adjudicate correctly in cases where two such sources seem to clash. *In that particular sense*, it serves the same purpose as the utility calculus. So if there is something about the content of the intellectual filter that separates virtue ethics from consequentialism and protects it against the charge of one thought too many, Response (2) has not identified what that unique content is.

(3) ‘*Phronesis* allows for preferential treatment but the other filters force us to treat all persons equally. It is the psychologically impossible requirement of non-preferential treatment that makes the other two filters, but not *phronesis*, succumb to the error of one thought too many.’

⁵⁴ K. Kristjánsson, *Justice and Desert-Based Emotions* (Aldershot: Ashgate/Routledge, 2006), 146–148.

⁵⁵ Op. cit. note 2, 484.

⁵⁶ Op. cit. note 8, 157.

⁵⁷ Cicero op. cit. note 25, 35.

It is helpful to remember that while the great medieval Christian thinkers retrieved, accommodated and ‘infused’ most of Aristotle’s basic tenets about the virtues, they remained sceptical of any insights that implied elitism, favouritism or differential treatment based on people’s allegedly unequal claims to moral worth. Christianity is, after all, at its core an egalitarian moral system, within which one is meant to love all one’s ‘neighbours’ equally through *agape* rather than through the favouritism-tainted lens of *philia*. This assumption was then subsumed within the two great secular systems of morality that developed during the Enlightenment. Is this perhaps what makes their two filters import one thought too many, on Williams’s understanding (as suggested e.g. by Bernstein⁵⁸)? After all, Aristotle says, in contrast, that it is ‘more shocking’ to ‘rob a companion of money than to rob a fellow-citizen’ and to ‘fail to help a brother than a stranger’.⁵⁹

While it is true that impersonality and impartiality are foreign to the spirit of Aristotelian virtue ethics, agent-relativity is in no way a random, subjective variable in Aristotle. In addition to the somewhat pedantic specific advice that Aristotle gives here (about returning favours to benefactors before favouring a friend and returning debts to creditors before making loans to friends⁶⁰), it is crystal clear that Aristotle’s partiality allowances are meant to be strictly calibrated according to demonstrated levels of moral virtue. Firstly, character friends are chosen precisely because of their ethical excellence, and they are to be discarded if they turn bad beyond redemption. Secondly, Aristotle discusses in detail conflicts that arise between the claims that a friend can have on us, versus a virtuous non-friend, and his conclusion is that if the friend is just a utility friend, then her claims on us are strictly limited, whereas the issue becomes more complicated if the clash is between the claims of a character friend and another ‘virtuous man’,

⁵⁸ Bernstein op. cit. note 12, 67.

⁵⁹ Op. cit. note 1, 224–225 [1160a4–6]; cf also 256 [1169a18–34].

⁶⁰ Ibid., 241 [1164b25–1165a4].

for the former is then also, *ex hypothesi*, virtuous. The overall conclusion seems to be that this has to be assessed on a case-by-case basis but, in any case, simply ditching agent-neutrality and giving everything spontaneously to the friend is what only ‘good-for-nothing people’ do.⁶¹

These Aristotelian considerations are far removed from the romanticised view of friendship as based on spontaneous preferential treatment that Bernstein,⁶² for one, attributes to Williams. There is no hint in Aristotle of an aestheticised view of friendship as lying beyond the limits of moral justification (as e.g. espoused by Nehamas⁶³) and beyond the scope of *phronesis*. The idea that the non-reflective partiality of friendship holds the key to how *phronesis* escapes the thrust of Williams’s argument seems to be a non-starter. To Williams’s credit, that idea is not his in the first place, for he explicitly admits that the notion of an attachment to a particular person as a psychological integrity-grounding project, in his sense, protected by a categorical desire, would have appeared ‘mysterious or even sinister’ to Aristotle.⁶⁴

(4) ‘The uniqueness of *phronesis* as a filter *vis-à-vis* the utility calculus is that it does not require the maximisation of value. That requirement is the main reason why consequentialism imports one thought too many. Hence, this criticism does not hit at *phronesis*-guided reflections on what friendship requires in particular cases.’

To be sure, although Aristotle places fairly strict moral constraints on the scope of agent-relativity that virtue ethics affords us, there is no hint of the idea of maximisation in his ethics. That is not to say that moral value comes without any quantification, for generally speaking, ‘the greatest virtues are necessarily those most useful to others’, such as justice and courage.⁶⁵ Yet virtue comes to us individuality-adjusted according to Aristotle. There is no description of an

⁶¹ Op. cit. note 5, 431–433 [1244a1–19].

⁶² Bernstein op. cit. note 12.

⁶³ Op. cit. note 10.

⁶⁴ Op. cit. note 3, 15–16.

⁶⁵ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, trans. G. A. Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 76 [1366b3–6].

individual's virtue repertoire available to us that abstracts from its instantiation in *that person* in all her psycho-social uniqueness. Some of the well-known things that Aristotle says about the golden mean of action and emotion may seem to indicate that there is an ideal imitable agent whose virtue consists in hitting this mean accurately on each occasion. However, on closer inspection, there is no unique blueprint of the perfectly virtuous person *per se* to aim for. For example, emulousness is a virtue for young people whereas adults do not need to emulate role models. Magnificence and magnanimity are virtues for people blessed with unusually abundant material resources but not for ordinary folks. Temperance in eating is not the same for Milo the athlete as for the university professor, because what is intermediate in virtue is relative to the individual, 'not in the object'.⁶⁶ And, from an educational perspective, a boxing instructor will not 'impose the same way of fighting on everyone'.⁶⁷ There is thus no *one* best way across individuals to be, say, virtuously generous as opposed to being stingy or wasteful. It all depends on your individual circumstance (are you poor or wealthy?) and your own natural inclination towards either extreme, away from which you should try to drag yourself – with the help of friends. When I love the generosity of my friend, I do not love it as matching well or less well the repeatable generosity of the perfectly generous person, for there is no such generosity *simpliciter*. There is an endless plurality of traits that all make the grade as virtuous generosity, as instantiated in different persons, and there is no way to choose between them in ways that satisfies some ideal condition of virtue-exposure maximisation.

The non-existence of a maximisation requirement (because there is no common currency to maximise) gives us considerable leverage in making wise *phronetic* choices regarding conflicting claims by different friends, or friends and (virtuous) non-friends, and some may even

⁶⁶ Op. cit. note 1, 43 [1106b1–7].

⁶⁷ Ibid., 295 [1180b9–11].

legitimately come down to mere tastes when there is no difference in demonstrated levels of moral worth.

Out of all the responses canvassed so far, this one comes closest to explaining the potential advantage of Aristotle-inspired virtue ethics, in general, and its *phronesis* filter, in particular, in escaping the thrust of Williams's one-thought-too-many argument. Yet I am not convinced that this response would have satisfied Williams himself, given the radical (and probably accurate) interpretation of his argument explained in Section 2.

5. Concluding remarks

This article has explored the common assumption that there is something about Aristotle-inspired virtue ethics that makes it immune to Williams's infamous one-thought-too-many argument. I have shown that the idea that virtue ethics has no filter, and hence imparts no extra thought into the moral decision process, is untenable. The reason is the simple one that Mill pointed out to us a long time ago: 'There exists no moral system under which there do not arise unequivocal cases of conflicting obligations'.⁶⁸ So far is it from being true that Aristotle suggests an exception to this rule that he explicitly provides us with a filter, called *phronesis*, to sort out how to strike a morally justifiable balance between competing sources of intrinsic value. To argue that this filter does not import an extra thought, it would have to be shown that *phronesis* is an intuition pump, rather than an intellectual virtue of adjudication and, furthermore, that the intuition to favour friends trumps all other considerations. However, neither happens to fit Aristotle's system. At all events, it is difficult to imagine Williams asking for blind attachment to friendship, to which *any* extra thought would be inimical.

⁶⁸ Op. cit. note 53, 71.

To escape Williams's curse, the only remaining way is to argue that the extra thought required by virtue ethics is not 'one thought too many'. The presumed advantage of virtue ethics must, in other words, lie in the content of its filter rather than the filter's non-existence. The article closed with an attempt to show that, contra deontology, the friendship motivation in virtue ethics is derived from the moral virtue, not the intellectual filter, and, contra consequentialism, *phronesis* does not require the maximisation of value. This argument goes some distance in shielding *phronesis* from Williams's complaint. Yet the work that still remains for *phronesis* to do, and the way it is meant to do it, would probably still count as a fetish on Williams's understanding, as well as falling under Stocker's sarcastic description of decision filters as 'mental alarm clocks'.⁶⁹ So there is no way to avoid a substantive disagreement between a neo-Aristotelian, such as the present author, and Williams on what exactly counts as one thought too many.

I happen to agree with Woodcock⁷⁰ that balancing our broad ethical obligations with authentic personal motives is bound to remain a non-trivial psychological challenge for any moderately demanding moral theory. I salute Aristotle for having tried to offer us an extra thought to guide our reflections on this challenge, and I maintain that the *phronesis* filter does not deserve the sardonic designation of 'one thought too many'. Filtering friendship through it is a morally justifiable, and indeed necessary, enterprise.

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⁶⁹ Op. cit. note 23, 458.

⁷⁰ Op. cit. note 24.

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